

# Strategies to Support Children with Oral Language Difficulties

Students with oral language difficulties often struggle to understand the language used in the classroom, which can considerably impact on their ability to learn across all academic areas. These children may also have difficulties expressing themselves, in both speaking and writing. It is important that teachers are aware of these difficulties, and implement strategies that increase or support a student's ability to understand and use oral language in the classroom.

## Following Instructions

- Explicitly teach the meaning of concepts frequently used in oral and written directions (e.g. *before, after, first, all*).
- Teach and practice how to use memory rehearsal strategies, such as listening for the number of parts in an instruction, repeating the directions and carrying them out.
- Provide cues to encourage students to tune-in and attend to the instructions:
  - > Obtain their attention first and ensure you have eye contact (prompt them to "listen", "look", or tap them on the shoulder)
  - > Seat students near the front or facing the board
  - > Reinforce instructions with written or pictorial cues, instructions or checklists on the board.
- Adjust your delivery of instructions to provide extra meaning:
  - > Slow down, ensure adequate volume and varied pitch, and use gestures paired with spoken information
  - > Keep instructions brief or provide just one part of the instruction at a time
  - > Be concise with spoken instructions (e.g. "James, please sit down" rather than, "James, would you please come over here and take a seat with everyone else?").
- Encourage students to request clarification from the teacher or a supportive peer before commencing the task. Respond positively, and with understanding, when the student asks for repetition or clarification.
- Provide a clear transition between activities. Name the new activity/topic and explain in a few steps what will happen or be taught. Review and finish the activity by summarising what they should have learned before transitioning to the next activity.

## Word Knowledge and Use (Vocabulary)

- All students will benefit from a targeted approach to teaching vocabulary, such as:
  - > Introduce five new, high-quality words each week
  - > Introduce the word in a meaningful context (e.g. a sentence)
  - > Reinforce teaching by providing a student-friendly definition and pictures to illustrate the word
- When introducing a new word, provide multiple repetitions of the word on that day and for the following weeks. Repetition needs to occur in various contexts.
- Provide multiple opportunities for the student to say the word. Provide them with corrective feedback if necessary so that they store the word's sound-based representation correctly.
  - > If it is a long word, break the word into syllables and encourage the student to watch your mouth.

- Identify and pre-teach key words before commencing oral or written work on a topic. Relate the information to the student's prior knowledge and experience, discussing meanings contextually or brainstorming related words.
- Encourage the student to ask about the meaning of unfamiliar words (not to just 'look it up in the dictionary'). Use the new word frequently in different contexts..
- Ensure all students are given equal access to high-quality texts. This may mean some students will need the text read to them in the classroom or at home. Assistive technology such as print to speech software or audiobooks may be helpful. This will ensure the students are exposed to more sophisticated vocabulary (and complex sentence structures) that rarely occur in spoken language, but frequently do in written texts.

## Grammar & Written Expression

- Consider the use of a written expression program that focuses first on developing oral understanding and learning of a text to scaffold the writing process, such as the Talk for Writing program.
- If the student says a sentence incorrectly, model the appropriate grammar back to the student (e.g. "You drew that! Wow, you drew a really great picture!").
- If the student uses the incorrect grammatical form in writing, explain to them how to correct the mistake, and then provide an opportunity to practice that form correctly.
- Make grammatical lessons multisensory in nature, so that the students develop a more concrete understanding of abstract concepts (e.g. Human Sentences: each student holds up a single word written on card and students arrange themselves in order to form sentences).
- Teach students the function of different word types (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives) and model how these words are utilised effectively in sentences. Provide students with multiple opportunities to build sentences after observing a demonstration.
- Display banks of words (e.g. according to word type) in the classroom so that students have easy access to words when expressing their ideas in speaking and writing.
- Encourage students to extend their spoken and written responses by adding detail (e.g. descriptive vocabulary and linking words).
- Utilise writing frames and structured templates to assist the student to formulate their response.
- Encourage the student to orally rehearse their response before writing down their ideas

## Higher-Level Language (Critical Thinking and Problem Solving)

- When asking questions about texts that require students to use higher-level skills such as inferencing, draw their attention to the part of the story or text in which they can find 'clues' to answer the question.
- Encourage students to create a visual picture of what they are reading or listening to so that they can better remember and recall details.
- Allow additional time so that the students can draw simple pictures to illustrate each component of what they are reading to support their comprehension and recall.
- Support students to identify and discuss the cause of events by helping them to relate the situation back to their own experiences (e.g. Why did the boy get sick? Prompt the student by asking questions such as: "What has made you sick before?")
- To support problem solving in other subjects such as mathematics, encourage students to highlight important details of the problem, and create simple drawings to illustrate the important components of the problem.

***TIP - for useful information and videos on identifying and supporting children with a Developmental Language Disorder in the classroom, visit the Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder (RADLD) website <https://radld.org>***